

# Conversations about Place in American Culture: An International Network Discussion

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## Introduction

Over two days at the end of April 2015, speakers from Brown University, the University of Copenhagen, the University of Manchester, and the University of Mississippi convened at the Center for Transnational American Studies, University of Copenhagen, for the inaugural symposium of a new American studies research network between the four universities. They were joined by scholars from other Danish and international universities for discussions that took the temperature of American studies as a regional, national, and transnational endeavor. The symposium theme, “Region, Nation, Globalization: Place in American Culture,” allowed for consideration of a wide range of topics, but the conversations that took place developed along specific thematic nodes.

The goal of this collaborative publication, co-authored by twelve members of the research network who presented at the symposium, is to distill and further some of these conversations. As such, the writing is in itself a transnational and hybrid endeavor, begun in the real world forum of the international conference, and developed in virtual form across the span of multiple time zones.

Part of the goal of the Brown-Copenhagen-Manchester-Mississippi research network is to build bridges that will allow for practical activities

such as the exchange of PhD students and visiting professors. But of course, the impetus behind these practical exchanges, and the push that universities worldwide are making toward the sometimes vaguely defined goal of “internationalization,” is intellectual exchange. What are the different methodologies and structural programs for teaching internationally? How does graduate training differ and what might we learn from one another? How might we think of research as a truly transnational international conversation, rather than a national or regional one?

What follows below is built up around this last issue. Scholars were tasked with not only responding to one of four thematic questions through their specific research focus, but also, in drafting their responses, exchanging material with the other respondents and incorporating these arguments and perspectives into their own pieces. The result is something like the publication form of a vibrant roundtable.

In each of the four conversations, three authors address a specific question about the role of place in American culture or current American Studies scholarship. The authors were asked to reference their own research areas in relation to the question and also to exchange their ideas, perspectives, and drafts with the two other respondents in their respective conversation. This essay presents the results of these four exchanges, which have revolved around the following questions: 1) To what extent are ideas of nationality recalibrated by transnational movements? 2) How can the notion of “borderlands” complicate traditional views of regional or national American identity? 3) How do different media and genres construct their own visions of place? 4) What does the re-interpretation of the South from the outside tell us about the function that region plays in the construction of American identities?

The respondents to the first question are Matthew Pratt Guterl, Cathryn Halverson, and Ian Scott; their contributions ask us to rethink how transnational cultural productions recalibrate both popular and scholarly ideas of the nation and of the place of national identity. In the second conversation, Jaime Harker, Charles Lock, and Joseph Morton remap traditional notions of regional/national American identity in the South, the Northeast, and the West coast. The third conversation between Peter Leese, Ryan Charlton, and Elizabeth Rodriguez Fielder explores how different media influenced the construction of place in US culture through networks of transnational circulation. In the fourth conversation, Martyn Bone, Felicia Bevel, and Virginia Thomas resituate “the South” as a travelling region in and outside the U.S. national imaginary.

Each of these four conversations reflects the wide variety of individual scholarly inquiry into questions of transnational places within American studies; taken together, they also offer important insights into where concerns in current scholarship meet and intersect. The conversations reveal themes and approaches that require a fresh look from the field, including a reconsideration of the nation after the transnational and material turns; a resituating of the notion of a “borderland” in the regional-national context; and attention to the shifting significance of spatio-cultural categories such as “the South.” The many connections between the authors’ contributions also invite further associative links beyond these central themes that, we hope, will inspire new methodological approaches in and beyond American studies.

### **CONVERSATION 1: The Place of Nation and the Transnational Turn**

To what extent are ideas of nationality recalibrated by transnational movements?

*The Nation as a Hot Mess*

**Matthew Pratt Guterl** (Brown University)

In the mid-nineteenth century, the slaveholding South broke away from the rest of the United States to form a new nation – the Confederate States of America. This new nation, the “CSA,” was dedicated to the Founding Father’s vision of a *herrenvolk* republic built on top of a foundation of chattel bondage. Upon its inception, it was engulfed in a war with the North, or the Union, or the United States, depending on how we describe what remained of the old republic. On one level, this seems like a story of national fragmentation, complete with a “breakaway republic,” a familiar theme in the 21st century. But, looking deeper, one notes that the slaveholding South had long been a globally-minded region, that it was linked by history, culture, and economic partnership and competition, to the broader circum-Caribbean, and that its gesture to the nation – to the idea of the Confederacy itself – was something of a break with its transnational past. Invoking the ideal of a Southern nation wasn’t just a response to the old American nation-state; it also meant turning away from the region’s history. So, too, did fighting a war – nation to nation.

I'm offering up this brief summary of the era of the Civil War to show how ideas of nation, region, hemisphere, and trans-nation are always in tension. In this simple narrative, we have the South, the Confederacy, the circum-Caribbean, the North, and the United States, and each of these conceptual communities overlaps, cleaves, and breaks down the others. And, in turn, there are other as yet unmentioned categories, like race, class, gender, and sexuality, categories that are imbricated with these others, and that are also often in dynamic, unresolved conflict. Indeed, major theorists of the transnational often dwell on race, offering it as a challenge to the nation, with unfortunate consequences at times. In any case, all of these ideas or concepts are constantly being recalibrated, their borders and intersections in constant redefinition. There is no stable moment, then, "before" the trans-nation and the "nation" come together or fall apart. And there is no moment, in turn, where only these two categories are in operation.

Theorizing and thinking through "nation" and "trans-nation," then, requires a willingness to tease apart dense, tight knots and peel back, slowly, layers and layers of overlap. Think, as you read this "Conversation," of the dynamic tension between "nation" and "trans-nation" that is revealed through Cathryn Luanne Halverson's dissection of the *Atlantic Monthly*. Or that is illuminated in Ian Scott's consideration of moving, shifting, transforming ideals of American nationhood, brought via film to European war audiences.

In the case of the Confederacy, one thinks of Eliza McHatton, the typical belle of the ball, whose Louisiana plantation was threatened by the Union army, prompting her to flee from the deep South to Mexico and then, ultimately, to Cuba, where she became, once more, a great planter, surrounded by slaves and indentured coolies. At certain moments in the narrative of this self-described exile, Eliza emphasizes her whiteness, her class position, her Southernness, even her Louisiana past.<sup>1</sup> She invokes the Confederacy, the United States, the community of great planters, and the notion of Civilization. Sometimes, these categories are jumbled up, and sometimes they are referenced as discrete things.

The challenge, for anyone writing about Eliza – or any such subject – is to try not to flatten out these ideas even in attempting to describe their interrelations in an orderly fashion. And, perhaps most importantly, to try

1 Eliza Moore Chinn McHatten Ripley, *From Flag to Flag: A Woman's Adventures and Experiences in the South During the War, in Mexico, and in Cuba* (New York: D. Appleton, 1889).

to resist the overwhelming authority of the nation-state in historiography, in the archive, and in interpretation. To let, that is, the nation be a hot mess, a generative coming together and falling apart of a range of localities, identities, and cultures. To think, moreover, not of the nation as something “outside” of the “trans-nation,” but to see it as an example, instead, of trans-national practice.

### *Atlantic Connections*

**Cathryn Halverson** (University of Copenhagen)

The *Atlantic Monthly* has become such a familiar institution that it is easy to forget the original significance of its name, a bridging of literary cultures on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. As the magazine evolved, it also looked increasingly westward, featuring writers from across the United States.

Ellery Sedgwick, upon assuming *Atlantic* editorship in 1908, resuscitated its circulation with a renewed commitment to geographical reach. As part of this project, he promoted a group of unlikely contributors he dubbed “Far-away Women,” mostly first-time authors who wrote about their experiences in Europe, Asia, the American South, and most especially the American West. Rather than “Literature with a big ‘L,’” Sedgwick favored the “unpremeditated record[s] of interesting happenings by an interesting person.”<sup>2</sup>

It was within this *Atlantic* movement that Gertrude Stein, based in Paris, descried her opportunity to finally have a mass-market hit of her own: a history that, to borrow Matthew Guterl’s formulation, “jumbles up” the categories by which we usually understand her. *Three Lives* had long since established Stein’s critical reputation; “Melanchtha,” despite its racial essentialism, was especially lauded. She was unable, however, to place her books with mainstream publishers, who found her too esoteric. For similar reasons, she failed to persuade Sedgwick to accept any of the poems, stories, and essays she sent him over the course of a full twelve years.

Stein’s challenge, as Phoebe Stein Davis expresses it, was to learn to write like a “plain-spoken American”<sup>3</sup> so as to vanquish her prevailing image as a Continental aesthete. She only secured that American voice—and the broad

2 Ellery Sedgwick, *The Happy Profession* (Boston: Little, Brown, & Co., 1946), 197.

3 Phoebe Stein Davis, “Subjectivity and the Aesthetics of National Identity in Gertrude Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*,” *Twentieth Century Literature* 45, no. 1 (1999): 38.

American readership she craved—with *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, published by the *Atlantic* in 1933.<sup>4</sup> Couched in Toklas's voice, this deliberately colloquial narrative echoes the life narratives of Sedgwick's "faraway women," writers for whom the vernacular was the only register to hand. Sedgwick implicitly classed Stein with these others, congratulating—infamously—"the real Miss Stein" for "pierce[ing] the smoke-screen with which she has always so mischievously surrounded herself."<sup>5</sup>

A newly minted celebrity, Stein crossed the Atlantic for a triumphant publicity tour, her first visit home in three decades. Her striking *Atlantic* success, in turn, recalibrated the magazine's practice. Shortly afterwards, Sedgwick published an African American woman writer—literally a singular event in his editorship—with Juanita Harrison's *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World*. Like Stein, Harrison too was an expatriate in France, although differently motivated. In her thirties, she escaped the grim racial conditions of her home state of Mississippi, first to work and travel across North America and then to do the same in Europe and around the world. Harrison can sound more like Stein than Stein. Of a harrowing train wreck, she recounts, "I was studying the book that means everything to me, Bradshaws Continental guide all of a sudden I was throwd across the compartment and hit my head. . . I was very dizzy but I thought about nothing but this book and kept calling my book, my book I was stunted."<sup>6</sup>

Sedgwick's choice not to amend Harrison's grammar and spelling has been viewed as racially motivated. However, I would argue instead (or as well) that *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, with its simple sentence structure and blithe orthographic disregard, fostered this choice. Thanks to Stein, a prose style like Harrison's was already within his purview. Carl Van Vechten, for one, recognized their kinship, urging Stein, "If there are any *Atlantic* Monthlies handy around your parts, please read Juanita Harrison's *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World*."<sup>7</sup> Both writers found a literary home in the deliberately transnational yet distinctly regional *Atlantic*.

4 Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. First serialized in *Atlantic Monthly* 151.5 (May 1933): 513-27; 151.6 (June 1933): 677-88; 152.1 (July 1933): 56-69; 152.2 (August 1933): 197-208.

5 Donald Clifford Gallup, "Gertrude Stein and the Atlantic," *Yale University Library Gazette*, January 1954, 126.

6 Juanita Harrison, *My Great, Wide, Beautiful World* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936; reprint, New York: G. K. Hall and Co., 1996), 50-51.

7 Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten, 1913-1946*, ed. Edward Burns (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 471.

*Transnationalism in a Time of War: Robert Riskin and WWII Documentary*  
**Ian Scott** (University of Manchester)

The place of nation was very much on the mind of Robert Riskin during World War II. More specifically, Riskin contemplated the difference between 'nationhood' and 'nationalism.' The former was all he desired in his films: a sense of community, understanding, tolerance and hope. The latter was, in Riskin's eyes, everything the Allies were focused upon defeating: prejudice, bigotry, force and the language of hate. The fact that Riskin's 'Projections of America' documentary series for the Overseas Bureau of the Office of War Information was at its most personal and inspiring when he commissioned and worked with filmmakers who were presenting the commonality of American life – *The Town*, *A Better Tomorrow*, *The Story of the TVA* – shouldn't be taken for granted with a series that was almost exclusively seen by overseas audiences. Why then did it appeal so much to those beyond America's shores?

The simple answer is universality and the enduring possibility that beyond wartime struggle and suffering lay hope that ordinary people everywhere, anywhere, could identify with. The idea sounded corny even then, so it's understandable that it seems dubious today especially when our attitude towards World War II propaganda has undergone such revisionism. Yet, there is no better example of the faith Riskin placed in the series, and its enduring connection to audiences, than 'Projections' very first film, *Swedes in America* (1943).

If Gertrude Stein struggled a decade beforehand to establish her 'voice' in America, as Cathryn Halverson indicates, Riskin felt little need to modulate the messages he was constructing to the wider world. Having Ingrid Bergman narrate the story of her people's passage to the United States was a calculated move to embolden suffering populations to expect not only succour from the US, but stardom in the aftermath of destruction and displacement. After the fact, attempts to undermine Riskin, 'Projections' and the whole OWI project backfired on the miscalculation that such films were precisely *too* American for audiences to grasp and thus couldn't be successful overseas. Riskin's transnational instincts knew far better.

A special screening of *Swedes in America*, in London in '43, was held as a favour by a theatre owner who proceeded to offer the view that under normal circumstances he would never book such a film because it had no

audience interest in the U.K.<sup>8</sup> Apart from the refutation that Britain went on to order 500 reels of the documentary for distribution throughout the country anyway, the target audience was always Sweden itself, and their audiences lapped up the film as *The New York Times* confirmed that August while quoting Riskin.<sup>9</sup> Indeed the success it had actually helped Sweden remain neutral when the Allies most needed it. And, as Riskin predicted, *Swedes in America* went on to find success well beyond Scandinavia. It was dubbed into eleven European languages, including Flemish, Danish and Portuguese, and was seen by more than 118,000 people in Egypt. In Australia and New Zealand, over 200,000 people watched the short film.<sup>10</sup>

Robert Riskin knew the language of transnational film for he knew how film transcended nationhood. It was a voice rooted in twentieth century American culture and society, but it was one, as Guterl explains of McHatton's relationship with the South, that resisted being locked into the overarching tendencies of the American nation-state. For the artists and artisans in this conversation then, the United States was both fixed point of reference and circumferential ideal; a nation-state as well as a transnational notion. The American place: everywhere and nowhere.

8 Transcript of Edward Lilly interviews with Lacy Kastner, April 18 and 23, 1945, OWI Record Group 208-350-71-17-03, Box 2, Record of the Historian relating to the Overseas Branch, 1942-45 in the National Archives, College Park, Maryland.

9 "The Overseas Motion Picture Bureau of the Office of War Information, which handles the situation in all areas save Latin America, has finally revealed to us, privately, some of the films, which the bureau has made, and Robert Riskin, its close-lipped director, has graciously come out and talked. ... It has made – and is making – short pictures, of which "Swedes in America" [is the first] ... it was made primarily for showing in Sweden with a Swedish narration by Miss Bergman, but it should be effective in other countries, for it has what Mr. Riskin calls an eaves-dropping method of propaganda." Bosley Crowther, "Destination Abroad: Pictures Sent Abroad", *The New York Times*, August 29<sup>th</sup>, 1943, Box 4:13, The Riskin Papers, part of the Fay Wray Collection at the University of Southern California Film and Television Library.

10 "SWEDES IN AMERICA is readied for dubbing into Danish, Dutch, French, Flemish, German, Greek, Italian, Norwegian, Portuguese, Spanish, and Turkish." (Overseas Motion Picture Bureau Report Sept 19, 1943) NARA, RG208, Box 357, Records of the Office of War Information, Overseas Branch, Bureau of Overseas Intelligence Central Files.



## CONVERSATION 2: Mapping Shifting Identities

How can the notion of “borderlands” complicate traditional views of regional or national American identity?

*Borders and Bridges: Regional Transnationalism and American Identity*

**Jaime Harker** (University of Mississippi)

Transnational American studies has been circulating in academic circles for nearly two decades. Disavowing the American exceptionalism that fueled that first generation of American studies scholars, transnational American studies investigates continuities between national and global trends, including the plantation system, slave rebellions, revolutions, and freedom movements. Immigrants’ ongoing networks with their home countries, the “foreign” influences of distinctively American practices and foods, the comparative international context of intractable “American” problems—all have changed the conversations scholars have about American identity and geography.

But you would never know it from contemporary American politics, where Trump’s improbable Mexican wall is his go-to stump speech. That sense of clear boundaries is buttressed by promising walls, deporting undocumented immigrants, blocking Syrian refugees as supposed “terrorist” immigrants, and preventing “homosexual invasions” of the heartland though anti-gay “religious freedom” bills. Enacting absolute boundaries between “American” and “other” (and “real/red” America vs. “blue/libtard” America) is a resurgent trend. Cosmopolitan multiculturalism is only for liberal traitors in cities. Conservative American politics still insist that the real America is rural, static, and homogeneous—or *that it should be*. “Make America Great Again” is wish fulfillment for an America that never has been.

Challenging this imagined hegemony means emphasizing the diversity of American regions, as do Charles Lock’s focus on hyphenated transnational immigrant identities versus melting-pot Americanization and Joe Morton’s research on representations of California’s regional identity as reconfiguring the national literary imagination about Los Angeles. For me, regenerating regional identity and geography means identifying “real” America as a borderland, too, undoing the imaginary hegemony of Trump nation. My most recent project, *Queer South*, investigates Southern lesbian-feminist

writers from the 1970s to the present and their reimagination of the South as a radical South, full of deviants and race traitors and carpetbaggers and racial, cultural, and sexual others.

This radical South was embraced, not only by expatriate lesbian Southerners living elsewhere, but by immigrants and race traitors in the bosom of Dixie. Take Sheila Ortiz-Taylor's 2006 novel *OUTrageous*, which details lesbian Latina poet Arden Benbow's migration to the South. The opening passage of the novel remakes the landscape:

Along either side of the highway, waist-high grass of an improbable green defined each curve, a green she had never known in the seared southern California rolling hills she had always adored. . . . She perhaps felt, despite her *Californio* lineage, her devotion begin to waver, to wander toward this new, lovely one, she who shimmered in moist heat and seductive promise: *La Florida*.<sup>11</sup>

Though Arden is consistently framed by white Southerners as an alien invader, *La Florida* reminds us that the particular white Confederate version of "The South" is a relatively new invention. Long before that English/American version took hold, the South was *La Florida*, a green haven inhabited by mestizo subjects who looked like Arden Benbow, not Scarlett O'Hara. And whatever the colonial, racist, and sexist legacies of *La Florida*, it represents a queered geography that could embrace Arden Benbow like a lover. The interlacing of *La Florida* within "the South" continues as she invokes key figures in Spanish New American history as her genealogical forebears: "She dreamed of Aztlan, the mythic lost land of the Aztecs, her people, . . . She, Arden Benbow, had returned to claim on behalf of all the earth's dispossessed the archetypal homeland for her people and to do so in the name of Malinche, first mother of language and confused identity."<sup>12</sup>

Arden creates a different genealogy for a landscape that insists on her radical outsidership, one that places her at the center, and she keeps invoking mythic female heroines and goddesses from that tradition. In a land obsessed with history, Arden trumps them all, by reaching for an older tradition that is actually indigenous to the landscape.

*La Florida* undermines the very notion of outside agitators and true Southerners, because Arden discovers a host of local allies: Bertha Michaels, the closeted lesbian assistant chair first recruited to work against Ar-

11 Sheila Ortiz-Taylor, *OUTrageous* (Midway, FL: Spinsters Ink, 2006), 2.

12 Ibid., 30-31.

den, who later helps her; migrant workers, forming an underground Latino community, which Benbow supports with a public rally for union rights; her African American neighbor, Hattie, who protects her from a crusading sheriff wanting to arrest Arden for the marijuana plants her students plant on the property; the white working-class men renovating her house; and even the athletes, placed in a compulsory poetry class with Arden, become converts and troublemakers. Ortiz-Taylor portrays a coalition of old-time residents, migrants, and outsiders that successfully counteracts the patriarchal Southern order.

My own wish fulfillment? Perhaps. But the transnational borderland of *La Florida* is guerilla action in the heart of Dixie, one that refutes the conservative notion of the rural.

*Transnationalism and the Hyphen:*

*Randolph Bourne and Raphael Hawaweeny*

**Charles Lock** (University of Copenhagen)

Randolph Bourne (1886-1918) coined the term “transnational”; Raphael Hawaweeny (1860-1915) exemplified the phenomenon, yet defied it. The first recorded occurrence of the term ‘hyphenated American’ can be dated to 1889. The *New York Times* of 15 September 1895 reports the arrival in Brooklyn, from Russia, of Raphael Hawaweeny (1860-1915), a native of Damascus, as Bishop for the Syrians:

Among the foreign colonies the Syrian colony is one that is attaining importance, as it has been steadily growing in numbers for several years past. The number of Syrians at present residing in this city is estimated at 10,000, and in the United States at 150,000. *Of course* nearly all of them are Christians. (Italics added.)

There are today some 3.5 million Americans of Arabs descent; they have generally avoided the hyphen, and are thus largely invisible as an ethnic group or “minority”. The White House correspondent Helen Thomas (1920-2013) was typical, recalling in 2002: “We were never hyphenated as Arab-Americans. We were American, and I have always rejected the hyphen.”<sup>13</sup>

From the earliest coining of the hyphenated American c. 1890 an “anti-

13 Helen Thomas, *My America: What My Country Means to Me, by 150 Americans from All Walks of Life*, ed. Hugh Downs, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 238.

hyphenation” movement developed. The controversy culminated during the First World War, when it was feared that German-Americans and Irish-Americans (in particular) might be less than whole-hearted in their commitment to the cause of the USA, should it declare war against Germany on the side of Britain. Former President Roosevelt warned on Columbus Day, 1915: “There is no room in this country for hyphenated Americans.... There is no such thing as a hyphenated American who is a good American. The only man who is a good American is a man who is an American and nothing else.”<sup>14</sup>

President Wilson seems not to have mentioned the hyphen until the War was over, but then in his Pueblo Colorado speech in support of the League of Nations, 25 September 1919, he reiterates and sharpens Roosevelt’s language: “any man who carries a hyphen about with him carries a dagger that he is ready to plunge into the vitals of this Republic.... If I can catch any man with a hyphen ... I will know that I have got an enemy of the Republic.”<sup>15</sup>

And this is the context in which one should admire the courage of Randolph Bourne, who died in the fall of 1918, from the Spanish influenza, at the age of 32. In July 1916 Randolph Bourne published in *The Atlantic Monthly* an essay entitled “Trans-national America”: a celebration of the hyphenate and a recognition of the value of the heterogeneous in a republic. Bourne coined the term “transnational” and advocated its use against the assimilationist principles of immigrants such as the Arab Americans, and particularly of Raphael Hawaweeny. The hyphen can be used by assimilationists to set up a border, to mark a continuing link, an unfinished crossing, between the place of origin and the United States; in this respect it is a punctuational fence that patrols and restricts those entitled to full membership of the Republic. For those like Bourne who choose to assert the hyphen, it complicates any notion of republic or nation, and creates zones within which one can be both American and something else.

Bishop Raphael had led the Arabs of New York and other American cities from Arabic to English as the liturgical language, and as the language of communication, education and social life; he is recognized as an influential and exemplary figure in the move towards assimilation. The hyphen

14 *Lewiston Daily Sun*, October 14, 1915.

15 Woodrow Wilson, *Woodrow Wilson: Essential Writings and Speeches of the Scholar-President*, ed. Mario R. Dinunzio (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 412.

might have been used to identify institutions, social clubs, newspapers, but this need not imply that those availing themselves of such would identify themselves by the hyphenate. One could attend a Syriac Church or read a Syriac-American newspaper (most of them in English) without identifying one's person as hyphenate. The extent of that assimilation is well displayed in the name under which Bishop Hawaweeny was canonized, in 2000: St. Raphael of Brooklyn. The centenary of his death was marked in 2015, by a well-established community of Christians of Arab descent within the United States who, partly thanks to St Raphael, need no hyphenate identity.

Once regarded as the most powerful radical intellectual in American history, Randolph Bourne would hardly wish to be canonized. But as the one who coined the term 'transnational' and profoundly elaborated its implications, Bourne should certainly be celebrated, and studied in the context of the fields and fences concerning us today.

#### Southern California and Regionality: A Consideration of Some Anglo-American Historical Perspectives

**Joe Morton** (University of Manchester)

My research examines early twentieth century representations of Los Angeles in bibliographic, archival and essayist networks. Considering the broad scope of this question, I would be hard-pressed to improve on comprehensive essays such as Mary Pat Brady's transhistorical and transnational synthesis (2014) or numerous works from within Borderlands Studies.<sup>16</sup> Here, I'll instead consider how borders and regional-national binaries have operated within a selection of Anglo-American perspectives on Los Angeles.

With regard to Anglo-American cultural mythologies of Los Angeles, two ideas continually reappear that place Los Angeles beyond a regional border. As scholars such as Eric Avila have noted, Carey McWilliams' ([1946] 1994) influential formulation of Southern California as an "island

16 See for instance, Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987); Hectór Calderón and José David Saldívar, *Criticism in the Borderlands: Studies in Chicano Literature, Culture, and Ideology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991); and Mary Pat Brady, "Borderlands" in *Keywords for American Cultural Studies*, eds. Bruce Burgett and Glenn Hendler (New York: New York University Press, 2014), 34-37.

on the land”<sup>17</sup> – a hermetic environment that both drastically refused and exaggerated American socio-cultural qualities found elsewhere – is the fullest realization of a regional understanding that continued to appear across many diverse twentieth century sources.<sup>18</sup>

A second trope pertinent to early 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-American interpretations of Los Angeles is the idea that the city is prominently figured along an insider/outsider binary. Mapped on to the spatial quality of Los Angeles as a significantly differentiated and demarcated area is an Anglo-American discourse which suggests that the region has always been significantly defined by those external to its border. For David Fine’s discussion of the Los Angeles Novel and the 1930s emergence of Los Angeles as a “literary center,”<sup>19</sup> this is the essential “starting point”<sup>20</sup>. As a regional literature, Fine remarks that early-to-mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Los Angeles is distinct for having been almost solely the construct of writers from elsewhere, from the American South and East, and from Europe: “The distanced perspective of the outsider, marked by a sense of dislocation and estrangement, is the central and essential feature of the fiction of Los Angeles...”<sup>21</sup> In his assessment of Los Angeles culture, architectural critic Michael Sorkin argues that the fundamental tenet of many such interpretations is “the myth that California is adjacent to the US, not exactly contiguous with it” and so, “[l]ike the “Orient” of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the common image of LA is the invention of outsiders, a traveler’s version, chained to the hyperbole of discovery.”<sup>22</sup> Characterizing Los Angeles as a dynamically bordered land, if not quite a borderland, has been central to Anglo-American interpretations.

Yet there remains much to explore in relation to borders and localities at an intra-regional level. My ongoing research considers how bibliographic establishments in early twentieth century Los Angeles (bookshops, archives, private collections) configured their extensive collections of California texts (dubbed Californiana). Inherent in these literary configurations are spatial and cultural borders, micro and macro regions. Ernest Dawson’s

17 Carey McWilliams, *Southern California: An Island on the Land*. (Layton, UT: Gibbs Smith, 1994).

18 See for instance Ibid; Eric Avila, “Essaying Los Angeles,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Literature of Los Angeles*, ed. Kevin R. McNamara (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 178-180.

19 David Fine, *Imagining Los Angeles: A City in Fiction* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2000), xi.

20 Ibid., 15.

21 Ibid., 15.

22 Michael Sorkin, “Explaining Los Angeles,” in *Exquisite Corpse: Writing on Buildings* (London: Verso, 1994), 48-49.

bookshop, established in 1905, was one of the oldest Los Angeles bookshops.<sup>23</sup> Here, *Californiana* was often subdivided into many topographical and descriptive groups that reflected these texts' key themes, be they descriptions of places such as Los Angeles or San Diego or, for example, the relation of travel narratives. Collecting and organizing *Californiana* in part meant that one was continuously reframing and remapping the region's literary field. Considering that the books from Dawson's catalogue were sold and became part of public and private collections, it is productive to consider how such borders and regional identities changed as the texts changed owners. These regional demarcations – mobile, malleable, open to reconfiguration – certainly complicate how we can think of the regional identity and bibliographic history of Southern California.

### CONVERSATION 3: Media and Representations of Place

How do different media and genres construct their own visions of place?

*"A Jungle for Strangeness": Jacob Epstein's Hester Street*

**Peter Leese** (University of Copenhagen)

As a boy growing up on the Lower East Side of Manhattan in the 1890s, Jacob Epstein (1880–1959) explored the city on foot: Harlem, Yonkers, Coney Island, and Rockaway. Born on Hester Street, Epstein knew the Jewish immigrant district, his birthplace, best of all. Later Epstein would become one of Britain's best-known and most controversial sculptors, but at this early stage in his career he drew local character studies and street scenes. Despite affection for his birthplace, Epstein could not have been entirely shocked to hear an uptown art tutor call Hester Street "a jungle for strangeness."<sup>24</sup> Such comments reveal a tension between "foreground" images created by observers (casual visitors, charity workers, anthropologists or journalists) who noticed the unusual, and background portraits created by observant migrants such as Epstein, who stressed the everyday.

Whose view prevailed, and why one view took precedence over another,

23 Kevin Starr, *Material Dreams: Southern California Through the 1920s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 308–310.

24 Jacob Epstein, *Epstein: An Autobiography* (London: Hulton, 1955), 8.

matters. The formations of urban metropolitan mass culture at the turn of the twentieth century continues to shape how we view migrant districts and migrants themselves. Like W.C Handy as well as Robert F. and Mabel Williams in Ryan Charlton and Elizabeth's Fielder's contributions below, Epstein used ephemeral media to project an alternative, imagined community.

Like Handy and the Williamses, Epstein spoke from a marginal social position. Jacob Riis, on the other hand, was an influential journalist-reformer who influenced the existing views around this time, even though his prose and photographs were not well-regarded by some among the younger generation. Critics such as fellow journalist Hutchins Hapgood saw melodrama and ethnic caricature as well as a panoramic mode of surveillance in Riis's prose, photographs and sketches. Hapgood's response was to write his own account, *The Spirit of the Ghetto* (1902), and to commission a series of illustrations by Epstein.<sup>25</sup> While Hapgood was still influenced by earlier city reporters such as James D. McCabe, Epstein made a more successful parallel move against Riis's visual style. Riis's best-known method of documentation was flash photography, which used a small magnesium-powder explosion to briefly illuminate dingy basements and tenement workshops. By contrast, when Epstein came to illustrate his home district, he concentrated on character: pared-down portraits in charcoal and ink. The contrast is instructive. Hapgood hired Epstein because he was an "insider" and fittingly it was the artist who proved more able to penetrate the mood and sensibility of the Jewish district.

Hapgood had two particular interests. First, in documenting the fluid social conditions in which the migrant functioned and the resultant tensions between groups such as old and young. Second, in illustrating the intellectual and artistic passions and personalities of the district, which amounted to a sociology of migrant knowing. Hapgood is most eloquent on the economic, housing or educational needs of new arrivals. He also communicates the urgency to find expressive forms, the need to assert identity as well as articulate a critique of the host society. He finds difference, strangeness and eccentricity in these communities.

Epstein's images modify, complicate and sometimes contradict Hapgood's intentions. His wider purpose is to demystify the immigrant quarter,

25 Moses Rischin, 'Introduction', Hutchins Hapgood, in *The Spirit of the Ghetto. Studies of the Jewish Quarter of New York* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1967), vii-xxxvi. The original text, layout and illustrations are reproduced online at: <http://www.ajhw.co.uk/books/book381/book381.html>



to show it as a world filled with identifiably ordinary people, to prevent its becoming “a jungle for strangeness.” To achieve this Epstein drew identifiable public figures, illustrated stories by the authors Hapgood describes, and used friends as models: his then girlfriend Adele (‘Intensely Serious’); the anarchist campaigner Emma Goldman (‘A Russian Girl Student’); and a composite portrait of Epstein and his closest friend Bernard Gussow (‘A Russian Type’).<sup>26</sup>

This seemingly ideal match between journalist-activist and illustrator had within it contradictory claims and purposes. These are most easily observed in the mismatch between Epstein’s drawings of people and places, and Hapgood’s picture titles, which stress social position, type and category. In their wider purpose, to counter the judeophobic mood of the early 1900s, it is important to note that Hapgood and Epstein’s work was largely unsuccessful. Though it became widely known from the 1960s, *The Spirit of the Ghetto* was much less widely read than Riis’s, while Louis Wirth’s later sociological study *The Ghetto* (1928) continued to stress insularity, deprivation and stagnation.

It proved harder than either journalist or artist anticipated to reconcile figure and ground, to connect decisively the outer and inner worlds of the Hester Street migrant.

### *Broadcast Radio in W. C. Handy’s Father of the Blues*

**Ryan Charlton** (University of Mississippi)

As Peter Leese has just argued, the formation of alternate narratives can provide new perspectives on place. While Leese deals with the local community of the Lower East Side, my reading of W. C. Handy’s autobiography *Father of the Blues* reconfigures American identity by locating it within global networks of cultural exchange. First published in 1941, Handy’s autobiography is as much a narrative of the rise of Handy’s musical empire as it is the story of his life. As he describes the transformation of the blues from a backwoods “primitive” musical form to a worldwide phenomenon—a transformation that coincides, not incidentally, with the emergence of the U.S. as a world power—Handy meditates extensively on the globalizing

26 Raquel Gilboa, . . . *And there was Sculpture: Jacob Epstein’s Formative Years 1880-1930* (London: Paul Holberton, 2009), 39-42.

effects of radio technology. Noting that the “loudest cry” of previous generations of Manhattan residents “could not penetrate beyond the Palisades,” Handy revels in the knowledge that “[t]oday,”

Father Knickerbocker...can chat with Singapore or London and broadcast his music around the world. Perhaps out where morning stars sing together, ether waves may have carried ‘I hate to see de evenin’ sun go down.’ Yes, along these waves my songs reach unbelievable lands and entertain numberless unknowns.<sup>27</sup>

“I hate to see de evenin’ sun go down” is, of course, the first line of Handy’s most famous song, “St. Louis Blues.” Handy’s depiction of the global triumph of the blues in the era of broadcast radio capitalizes on a discourse of American cultural imperialism most closely associated with Henry Luce, whose famous *Life* magazine editorial, “The American Century,” was published earlier the same year. In this editorial, Luce calls for nothing short of the Americanization of the entire world, citing the ubiquity of “American jazz, Hollywood movies, American slang, American machines and patented products” as evidence of “an immense American internationalism” already underway.<sup>28</sup> Handy’s engagement with Luce’s brand of American internationalism—essentially a model of assimilation writ large—has undoubtedly contributed to the critical dismissal of *Father of the Blues*. However, while certain portions of Handy’s autobiography depict the blues as a quintessentially American cultural product to be exported hegemonically across the globe, reductive readings of *Father of the Blues* as a simplistically assimilationist text neglect pivotal moments that undermine Luce’s model of globalization as Americanization.

Rather than imagining the blues as the product of an isolated or exceptional American experience, Handy’s autobiography works to recover the origin of the blues in the African diaspora. His recollections of his time spent in Cuba as part of a traveling minstrel troupe during the first U.S. occupation of the island allow him to characterize the blues as situated in, and the product of, transnational networks of cultural exchange. These networks, as Elizabeth Fielder demonstrates in the following piece, would become an increasingly important means of critiquing American identity during the Cold War. Although Handy couches his recovery of the transnational elements of the blues within a celebration of American imperialism,

27 W. C. Handy, *Father of the Blues* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1991), 272.

28 Henry R. Luce, “The American Century,” *Life*, February 1941, 65.

affirming the myth of America's disinterested benevolence in the war of 1898, he reframes the relationship between the U.S. and Cuba as one of mutual benefit, suggesting that "[i]t would be hard to say...which country profited most from the consequent interchange of ideas and customs."<sup>29</sup>

Handy's time in Cuba allows him to forge connections with an Afro-Cuban musical tradition that would later shape his own blues music. While exploring Cuba and the Havana music scene, Handy becomes intrigued by the rhythms of Cuban music, which he later incorporates into many of his most famous songs. For example, Handy incorporates a Habanera rhythm—which he discovers to be African in origin—into his "Memphis Blues" and then later more prominently into his "St. Louis Blues," which he describes as his attempt to write a song using "all that is characteristic of the Negro from Africa to Alabama."<sup>30</sup>

This description of "St. Louis Blues" as a musical expression of the African diaspora rather than an emblem of American exceptionalism invites us to see the Americanness of the blues as a secondary if not superficial characteristic, so that when Handy imagines ether waves carrying his "St. Louis Blues" to "unbelievable lands and...numberless unknowns," America is not located in the content but rather the means of dissemination. Or put differently, Handy supplants Luce's model of unidirectional cultural output with one in which forms and ideas neither originate nor terminate in the United States but rather circulate through it, "follow[ing] the maps of the world even to distant lands that welcome...African ideas in a new American dress."<sup>31</sup>

*Broadcasting the Revolution: Radio Free Dixie's Hemispheric Soundscape*  
**Elizabeth Rodriquez Fielder** (University of Mississippi)

As Ryan Charlton argues above, our focus in this conversation on the "means of dissemination" and networks of circulation reveals new perspectives on spatial identity that defy the political boundaries of the nation-state. In the case of Radio Free Dixie, Robert F. and Mabel Williams' 1961–1966 broadcast from Havana, the hemispheric circulation network from Cuba to

29 Ibid., 121.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid., 229.

the U.S. South reminds us of the proximity of the Civil Rights Movement to the Cold War political agenda.

Robert F. Williams had previously been the president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in Monroe, North Carolina before seeking exile in Cuba in order to escape the FBI's false accusations of kidnapping.<sup>32</sup> His radical politics made him a FBI target while also gaining the admiration of Fidel Castro, who allotted him 50,000 watts to broadcast Radio Free Dixie.<sup>33</sup> Each week people across the U.S. South could tune in to hear the broadcast's mix of news, editorials, and music that tied together the Civil Rights Movement with Marxist and anti-colonial revolutions around the world. On the air, the Williams would play "Dixie," the anthem of the Confederacy before launching into Robert's vitriolic editorials. With commentary such as, "Racist America, it is later than you think...let our people take to the streets in fierce numbers and let our battle cry be heard around the world, freedom, freedom now, or death,"<sup>34</sup> he would call for armed self-defense and global revolution.

Although radio programming for African American audiences increased in popularity during the 1960s,<sup>35</sup> Radio Free Dixie offered an unfiltered radical black politics unprecedented in U.S. radio. As Peter Leese observes above, alternative media provides a fresh perspective to historical narratives and calls on us to question "whose view prevailed" over time. Radio Free Dixie contradicts preconceived notions of the Civil Rights Movement's commitment to non-violence and provides evidence of black radicalism that infiltrated U.S. borders several years before Stokely Carmichael uttered the phrase "black power" in 1966.

It also provides an alternate perspective on the Cold War radio wars where the U.S. and Cuba used radio as a propaganda tool. As African Americans in exile, the Williams were in a unique position; even though Mabel claimed Cuba as a "free territory of the Americas where integration is an accomplished fact," the couple also rhetorically positioned revolution as

32 Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South*, (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006).

33 Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*. (Chapel Hill : University of North Carolina Press, 1999).

34 *Radio Free Dixie* broadcast July 31, 1964, Box 6, Folder 2, Robert F. Williams Papers 1948-2014. The Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan Libraries Comp.

35 Brian Ward, *Radio and the Struggle for Civil Rights in the South*.

culturally American, in the “spirit of Valley Forge.”<sup>36</sup> Radio Free Dixie’s musical program blended the sounds of blues, folk, rock and jazz, providing a soundtrack of “seldom-heard songs of brutal oppression and dehumanization that no American radio station dares broadcast.”<sup>37</sup>

Radio Free Dixie played songs that critiqued U.S. racism, such as Nina Simone’s “Mississippi Goddam” and union ballads associated with the working-class struggles, thus subversively undermining the U.S. Cold War cultural diplomacy that positioned black music as inherently American.<sup>38</sup> Their remix of music and editorial created a collaborative soundscape of dissent and contributed to what Art M. Blake calls an “invisible disembodied shared blackness”<sup>39</sup> offered by radio beyond the jurisdiction of the nation-state. Listeners in the U.S. South mailed records and news editorials to Cuba through alternate pathways in Canada; audiences were not passive consumers, but rather actively contributed to the broadcast.

However, when the Cuban government critiqued the utility of popular music,<sup>40</sup> Radio Free Dixie continued to broadcast “the soul side of rock” in defiance, and retorted with quips about the “socially-conscious rock and roller.”<sup>41</sup> In what Mabel referred to as their “political education,”<sup>42</sup> the Williams realized that both sides of the Cold War could not understand the black liberation struggle and used their broadcast to transcend any national agenda. Through its unique remix of culture and politics, Radio Free Dixie calls on us to rethink space through its hemispheric soundscape and draws attention to alternative networks of activism during the Cold War Civil Rights era.

36 Mabel Williams, “Mabel Williams on the Beginnings of Radio Free Dixie,” (San Francisco: Freedom Archives, February 26, 2014), *Vimeo*.

37 *Radio Free Dixie* broadcast July 31, 1964.

38 Penny Von Eschen, *Satchmo Blows Up the World: Jazz Ambassadors Play the Cold War*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

39 Art M. Blake, “Audible Citizenship and Audiomobility: Race, Technology, and C.B. Radio,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (2011): 531-553.

40 Timothy B. Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power*.

41 *Radio Free Dixie* broadcast July 31, 1964.

42 Mabel Williams, “Mabel Williams on the Beginnings of Radio Free Dixie.”

#### CONVERSATION 4: Travelling Regions: The South outside the South

What does the re-interpretation of the South from the outside tell us about the function that region plays in the construction of American identities?

*Transnational American Studies with "The South"*

**Martyn Bone** (University of Copenhagen)

Despite the twenty-first century rise of the New Southern Studies, there remains a residual assumption that only native-born writers produce "southern literature": a disciplinary version of what I call "the Quentissential fallacy." In William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (1936), Quentin Compson's declaration to his Canadian roommate that "You cant understand it [the South]. You would have to be born there" anticipates the kind of literary-critical nativism that precludes dialectical perspectives from beyond the region—or within it, by immigrant authors and characters.<sup>43</sup>

During the late 1990s, American studies famously took its "transnational turn." Paul Giles argues that "the multidimensional effects of globalization have reconfigured the premises of U.S. national identity" so that "old area-studies nostrums about exceptional forms of national politics and culture... have become almost irrelevant."<sup>44</sup> From a New Southern Studies perspective, one might echo Giles by positing that the effects of globalization in the U.S. South have rendered redundant hoary nostrums about *regional* distinctiveness. Yet as Jon Smith observes, mainstream American studies maintains a "convenient southern exceptionalism" of its own: the region stays "the staid, backward Other" that allows a self-consciously "sexy" American studies to remain "energetic, future-oriented, young, and passionate."<sup>45</sup>

In my current book project, I explore how for almost a century an eclectic array of authors born outside the South and United States have produced writings that challenge area-studies field-imaginaries separating not only region from nation, but also region and nation from the world. On one hand, "southern regionalism" is insufficiently "scale-sensitive" when reading,

43 William Faulkner, *Absalom, Absalom!* (New York: Vintage International, 1990), 289.

44 Paul Giles, *The Global Remapping of American Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011), 1, 16.

45 Jon Smith, *Finding Purple America: The South and the Future of American Cultural Studies* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2013), 124.

say, Lan Cao's *Monkey Bridge* (1997) or Ha Jin's *A Free Life* (2008). These novels feature Vietnamese and Chinese immigrant protagonists in suburban Virginia and Georgia respectively, for whom "the South" is not merely (as Smith has termed it) "an unhelpful scalar unit" but an irrelevant one.<sup>46</sup> Hence we may need to practice what Leigh Anne Duck terms "southern studies without 'the South.'" <sup>47</sup> On the other hand, American studies must pay *more* attention to "the South" as something other than its own exceptionalist shibboleth—as integral to its own oft-debated "futures."

How might we parse this apparent paradox of a Southern studies *without* "the South" and a (transnational) American studies *with* it? Suzanne Jones declares that "[i]nstead of...rigidly delimiting southern literature," we should consider how "writers who are new immigrants...can help us to think globally and comparatively about the region."<sup>48</sup> Cao and Jin are among the immigrant writers who practice this globalized poetics of relation. Yet acclaimed books by major U.S.-born (but not southern!) authors also re-scale the region. Precisely because "the South" is not the scalar unit at which texts like Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981, about the black diaspora in Florida and the Caribbean), Peter Matthiessen's *Shadow Country* (2008, an epic account of Everglades entrepreneur Edgar J. Watson as an allegory of U.S. imperialism) and Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun* (2009, mapping post-Katrina New Orleans through the traumatic experiences of a Syrian immigrant) are conceived or conventionally received, they too can "help us to think globally and comparatively about the region."<sup>49</sup>

Reading such novels requires a Southern studies without "the South" stuck in amber as a homogenously distinctive region, yet still able to register that these texts depict disturbing historical-geographical continuities between slavery, convict labor, and the abuse of immigrant workers today. But these books also beg a transnational American studies with "the South": a critical praxis which recognizes that such exploitative labor relations are less distinctly "southern" than identifiably American. Ultimately, (new) southern studies and (transnational) American studies would benefit from

46 Jon Smith, "On the Limits of the 'Creating and Consuming' Paradigm," in Martyn Bone, Brian Ward, and William A. Link, eds., *Creating and Consuming the American South* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2015), 75.

47 Leigh Anne Duck, "Southern Nonidentity," *Safundi: The Journal of South African and American Studies* 9, no. 3 (2008): 329.

48 Suzanne W. Jones, "Who Is a Southern Writer?" *American Literature* 78, no. 4 (2006): 725.

49 Ibid., 725.

a fuller mutual understanding of how such texts represent both region *and* nation as inextricable from the capitalist world-system that we now call “globalization.” The following case studies by Felicia Bevel and Virginia Thomas are valuable contributions to just such an understanding.

*Rethinking Region and Nation: The Old South and U.S. Empire*

**Felicia Bevel** (Brown University)

In March 1906, a small North American town enthusiastically prepares for the arrival of one of its favorite stage productions, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. The local newspaper has been advertising the show for weeks, describing it as “faithfully portray[ing] several scenes of southern life during Antebellum days in the far south.” A new highlight of the performance will be “genuine colored people” in “funny scenes in the cotton fields.” In the days that follow, audience members applaud the “authentic” whipping scene, the soulful jubilee singing, and the comical gyrations of Topsy on stage that produce roars of laughter throughout the theater. The show enabled spectators to see the bygone days of the “sunny south” brought to life.<sup>50</sup>

Stetson's Uncle Tom's Cabin Company met huge success and a packed opera house in Moyie, a small town in Canada's British Columbia. Based off of Harriet Beecher Stowe's widely read 1852 novel, stage productions such as this one—otherwise known as Tom Shows—were all the rage in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century. Stetson's Company, an American troupe, successfully exported this stage production to Canada. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Tom Shows were among many American cultural products containing romanticized imagery of the antebellum South that traveled beyond U.S. borders. At a time when the U.S. was coming together under the banner of sectional reunion (which depended on a nationwide participation in Old South nostalgia), the idyllic plantation landscape depicted in Tom Shows and other traveling cultural texts like blackface minstrel performances helped project the U.S. as a white, imperial nation within the larger Anglophone world.<sup>51</sup>

50 *Moyie Leader*, March 3, 1906, 1. *University of British Columbia Historical Newspapers Collection*. Accessed April 3, 2016, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/bcnewspapers/xmoyie/items/1.0183749>.

51 For more on sectional reunion, see David Blight, *Race and Reunion: The Civil War in American Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2001).



Such transnational representations of the Old South therefore cannot be understood outside of the context of U.S. empire, for the same bucolic images of the southern past that emerged in Tom Shows were firmly linked to narratives of U.S. “modernity” and “progress” on display at world’s fairs. From the mammy-esque Aunt Jemima exhibit at the 1893 Columbian Exposition to “The Old Plantation” attraction at the 1904 St. Louis World’s fair, the familiar southern landscape appeared alongside unfamiliar people and objects from U.S. imperialist ventures like the Spanish-American War.<sup>52</sup> The scientific and technological innovations showcased at these expositions manifested national narratives that were predicated on the gendered and racialized hierarchical ordering of populations and nations. These notions of racial difference translated domestically into a black/white binary rooted in the familiar southern plantation imaginary.

Yet this familiar plantation geography was based on an illusion, on a myth of a southern past that never existed. The image of the faithful slave embodied by Uncle Tom and Aunt Chloe in Tom Shows was a fiction that, according to W. Fitzhugh Brundage, was perpetuated through the everyday rituals of ordinary people basing their sense of self on a regional narrative that required the silencing of alternative histories.<sup>53</sup> It was this fictionalized vision of the southern past that traveled beyond the nation and aided in the expansion and contraction of U.S. borders. These transnational flows simultaneously helped to incorporate acquired territories into the nation’s growing imperial geography while excluding the inhabitants of those distant spaces from the body politic and its attendant privileges.<sup>54</sup>

Reinterpreting the South from outside the South requires rethinking not only regional boundaries but also national borders. The relationship between region and nation necessitates a transnational approach, one that, as Martyn Bone articulates, considers a (transnational) American Studies *with* the South. We might therefore understand the construction of the nation as

52 M. M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998).

53 W. Fitzhugh Brundage, *The Southern Past: A Clash of Race and Memory* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2005).

54 Matthew Frye Jacobson discusses this expansion and contraction of U.S. borders, describing how the nation opened its borders to immigrants who provided cheap labor for the factories that fueled industrialization, and to American exports that traveled to foreign lands that were real or imagined spaces of U.S. empire. See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876-1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002).

a project that unfolded at the level of the region through the transnational circulation of cultural products containing, as Virginia Thomas describes in her piece on The Red Rooster, a sort of palatable nostalgia.

*Preserving Southern Nostalgia: The Red Rooster Harlem*

**Virginia Thomas** (Brown University)

As you enter the doors of the Red Rooster Harlem from Malcolm X Boulevard, the smells of down-home cooking, and the sounds of lively chatter and soul music immediately fill your senses. Folk art style paintings, jars of pickled fruit, black and white portraits of sharply dressed Harlem locals and vintage doo-dads swirl together in this internationally popular swanky-meets-country-store tourist destination. Named for the Red Rooster restaurant of 1960s Harlem, the contemporary Red Rooster calls upon histories of the Great Migration from the South and food traditions black people brought with them to authenticate its place in Harlem's landscape. During this time, black-owned southern and soul food restaurants played important roles as sites of black economic empowerment and community bonding.

The Red Rooster claims to take part in activist documentation of this historical legacy, but in fact uses "southern comfort" to make that idea more palatable. As demonstrated by Chef Marcus Samuelsson's memoir and his aesthetic choices in the Red Rooster, the Rooster plays upon the history of black cooking practices in an effort to naturalize the original Red Rooster's cultural geography, but employs southern nostalgia to heighten its exchange value. The contemporary Red Rooster proves an important site for reading the South outside of the South because of its imprint on Harlem's landscape.

Chef Marcus Samuelsson was born in Ethiopia and adopted into a Swedish family at age two. As he explains in his memoir, *Yes, Chef!*, a sort of transnationally-framed story of bootstrap-success, the Red Rooster is not merely a restaurant *in* Harlem. Rather, Samuelsson envisions the Red Rooster as a cultural institution *of* Harlem that, like the Apollo and Studio Museum, documents African American history but through the lens of food.<sup>55</sup> How, then, do customers encounter this site as one of historical production for their consumption?

55 Marcus Samuelsson and Veronica Chambers, *Yes, Chef!: A Memoir*, (New York: Random House Publishing, 2008), 312.

Samuelsson describes the desired atmosphere for Red Rooster patrons to imbibe this history: “I wanted the food to be done right, but to be more like a Polaroid picture than a high-def image ... I wanted the waiters to wear stylish tunics and clean jeans ... I wanted the music to be B-sides ... So much of what makes a restaurant are the things you don’t notice, but feel.”<sup>56</sup> This quote gestures to the affective and aesthetic atmosphere Samuelsson crafts in the restaurant; one that can be summarized by a sort of hazy southern comfort. The menu and server uniforms add texture his intention, creating nuance in how the Rooster’s customers should feel while purportedly learning about Harlem’s food history.

Showcasing dishes like shrimp and grits, “mac and greens”, “blackened catfish,” cornbread, and deviled eggs, most of the food on the menu is exemplary soul food. During the soul food movement, the connection between soul food and southern food remained important for black cooks; as some scholars have argued, soul food symbolized the African American experience in the South and the unique wisdom black Americans had from their familial ties to the South.<sup>57</sup>

One way the Red Rooster cites this history is through its menu, claiming its place in Harlem, with an additional southern twist. As its online menu states, “the Red Rooster serves *comfort food* celebrating the roots of American cuisine and the diverse culinary traditions of the neighborhood.”<sup>58</sup> Retrofitting soul food with “comfort food” and diversity rhetoric, the Red Rooster laces the restaurant experience with a southern brand of racialized and gendered economies of feeling. That type of feeling, southern comfort mixed with the taste of diversity as a flavor, attempts to knead out histories folded into the food—black labor exploitation practices and of black creativity through cookery. This regionalized comfort economy resurfaces in the servers’ “stylish tunics.” The waiters and waitresses that serve customers are mostly people of color. Their uniform consists of chambray tops with small red bandanas either tied around their neck or worn around their head. Though more subtle, this dress code smacks of “Sambo” and “Jemima” stereotypes.

Reading the southern comfort aesthetics and affective terrains woven

56 Ibid., 301-302.

57 Frederick Douglass Opie, *Hog and Hominy: Soul Food from Africa to America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 137-138.

58 “The Red Rooster Harlem” accessed April 1, 2016, <http://redroosterharlem.com/>

throughout Samuelsson's historical project at the Red Rooster raises important questions about the circulation of southern nostalgia to glaze over and sweeten the history of black cookery. The marketing of Harlem's history to an international customer base through southern nostalgia evokes precisely the kinds of transnational and regional exchanges that Martyn Bone and Felicia Bevel consider in their pieces on cultural migrations to and from the South. Citing the history of Harlem's soul food while using southern nostalgia to heighten its exchange value, the Red Rooster is an important space for understanding how contemporary sites obscure and syphon profits from black activist legacies.